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THE VEDANTA

ITS THEORY & PRACTICE

(A lecture delivered in America)

BY
SWAMI SARADANANDA

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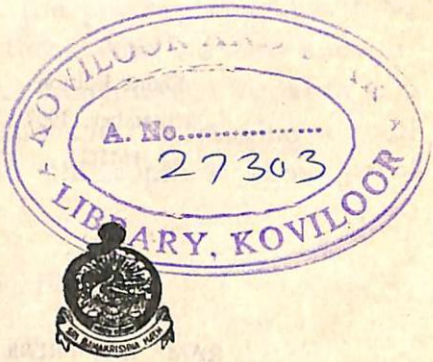

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The following pages are a reprint of a lecture delivered by Swami Saradananda before an American audience. It is hoped that the present booklet will be of help to those who want to know in outline the fundamentals of Vedanta and their implications in the existing state of religious and philosophical thoughts of the world.

February, 1928.

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THE VEDANTA

ITS THEORY AND PRACTICE

Our subject this evening is the philosophy of the *Vedānta* and its application to the life of man. This high system of philosophy was evolved in India thousands of years ago, but it is difficult to determine the precise date it was first evolved. We find its existence long before Buddhism and long before the age of the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, the two great pre-Buddhistic epics of India. By examining all the different religions and sects that exist in India, we find the principles of the *Vedānta* underlie each one of them. Nay more, the *Rishis* or seers of thoughts, the fathers of the *Vedānta*, claim that its principles underlie all the different religions

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that exist on the face of the earth, and all that will come in future even. The goal, which the *Vedānta* points at, is the goal to which all religions, all society, all humanity are rushing forward either consciously or unconsciously, through the process of evolution.

One great peculiarity of this philosophy is that, it is not built around one person or prophet. It is founded on the 'latter portion or the knowledge portion of the Vedas,' as the term *Vedānta* shows. The term *Veda* from the Sanskrit root *vid* to know, means, according to the oldest Hindu commentator, all the supersensuous knowledge, that has been revealed to man up to the present, and that which will be in future. And to the books which kept the record of this knowledge, the term *Vedas* became applied later. Then the Vdeic commentator goes on saying that

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this supersensuous knowledge might be revealed not only to Hindus but to other people, and their experience should be regarded as *Vedas* also. The *Vedas* were divided into two great divisions, 'the work portion', which teaches man how by the performance of duty, the observance of morality and other acts he might go to heaven, a better place of enjoyment, and 'the knowledge portion' which teaches him that not even the enjoyments of heaven should be his aim in as much as they too are fleeting and transitory, but to go beyond all relativity and find in himself the Divine, the centre of all knowledge and power. Of course it took ages for the Hindu mind to evolve this system of philosophy.

Speaking of philosophy, we must always keep in mind that it never went against religion in India. They always went

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hand in hand. And religion in order to appeal to man as a whole, should not only appeal to his heart but to his intellect also, and therefore must have a sound basis of metaphysics. For is not man a compound being, a combination of reason and emotion and will? Can any religion satisfy him which does not fulfil all his highest aspirations in these fields?

The rapid march of science and the wonderful discoveries it is making every day by the study of the external and the material world, is striking terror into the hearts of many. They seem to think that the foundation of religion is being undermined day by day and the whole social fabric built on this foundation is in imminent danger. But the seers of old, who by their study of the internal world, found the basis of religion, of morality, of duty, and in short, of everything in that Unity

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which forms the background of this universe, that ocean of Knowledge and Bliss Absolute from which the universe has come out, if they were here today, would have rejoiced to find that instead of undermining, science is making the basis of religion stronger than ever in as much as it is rapidly approaching towards the same goal, the same Unity. And it must be so ; for is not the universe one connected whole? Is not the division of it into external and internal an arbitrary one? Can we ever know the external *per se* ? Then again we speak of the natural laws which govern the external ; but are laws anything else than the method or manner in which our mind connects into a link a series of phenomena ? This universe, according to the *Vedānta*, is one connected mass. Start from the external and you come to the internal and *vice versa*. It has

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come out of the infinite ocean of Knowledge and Bliss and will go back to it again. It is evolving and involving from all eternity. View it as one unit and it can have no change and motion. It is perfect and all change is within it. For change and motion is only possible when there is comparison, and comparison can only be made between two or more things. Again this chain of evolution and involution, of manifestation and returning to the unmanifested or seed form of nature can have no beginning in time. To admit a beginning of it would be to admit the beginning of the Creator, and not only that, but that he must be a cruel and partial Creator, who has produced all these diversities at the outset. Then again there would arise another difficulty—the Creator, the first cause, must either have been perfected or imperfected by the

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creation. So, according to the *Vedānta*, the creation is as much eternal as the Creator Himself, only it sometimes remains in a manifested state, and sometimes in an unmanifested. What then is the purpose, the motive of this creation, this eternal flow of evolution and involution? The answer which the *Vedānta* gives is that it is a play of the Infinite. You cannot ascribe any motive to the Perfect, the Absolute without making Him imperfect. The Infinite, the Perfect must have no motive to compel It to create. The Infinite must be absolutely free and independent, and the very conception of the finite, the relative, implies the existence of the Absolute. The Absolute is the only existence and the universe is but a speck in that infinite ocean of Knowledge and Bliss. He is playing with Himself and projecting this

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world of phenomena. He is appearing through all these masks of imperfection, and at the same time He is remaining one and perfect in all splendour and glory. 'He vibrates and He does not vibrate, He is far and He is near; He is within all and He is without all this world of phenomena.' 'As the web-wombed spider projects and takes back the thread, as hair grows on the head of a man (without any effort), so this universe comes out of that infinite ocean of Knowledge and Bliss and goes back to It again.'

Science, by tracing the evolution to its cause, has arrived at the laws of the survival of the fittest and sexual selection for the change of one species into another. The *Vedānta* is one with it as regards the truth of the evolution, but differs from it in as much as it says that the cause of the change of one species

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into another is the struggle of the Divine within every form, to manifest Itself better and better. As one of our great philosophers had said, in the case of the irrigation of a field, where the tank is placed in a higher level, the water is always trying to rush into the field, but is barred by a gate. Open the gate, the water will rush in by its own nature. This struggle of the Divine has produced or evolved higher and higher forms up to the man-form. It is going on still and it will be completed only when the Divine will manifest Itself perfectly, without any bars or bolts to hinder Its expression. This highest point of evolution transcends even the conscious existence, and so we shall call it the superconscious existence. This stage of development has been reached by individuals long ago. Christ and Buddha and all the great

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teachers, which the world has produced, attained to that state. The whole of humanity is approaching towards that unconsciously. But is such a stage possible, where the evolution will attain its completion ? The *Vedānta* says it is. Every evolution presupposes an involution. To admit an unending chain of it will be to conceive motion in a straight line, which modern science has proved to be impossible. But what would take society ages and ages to attain, individuals can attain even in this life, and have attained it as proved by the religious history of the world. For what are all the Bibles but the records of experiences of men who attained to that stage ? Examine them and read between the lines and you will find that the same stage which the *Vedānta* expresses in the famous aphorism as 'Thou art that infinite ocean of Knowledge and Bliss' (*Tat*

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tvamasi), is that which was expressed by Buddha as attaining to the *Nirvāna* (perfected state), and by Christ as becoming as perfect as the Father in Heaven, and by the Mohammedan Sufis as becoming one with the Truth. The *Vedānta* claims that this idea of the oneness of *man* with the Divine, that the real nature of him is infinite and perfect, is to be found in every religion in India or outside of it ; only in some the idea is expressed through mythology and symbology. It claims that what one man or a few men attained long before, is the natural inheritance of all men and every one will attain to it sooner or later. Man, therefore according to the *Vadānta* is divine, and everything that is strong and good and powerful in human nature is the expression of the divinity within him.

In this superconscious existence lies

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the basis of all ethics. Attempts have been made in the present time to find a permanent basis of morality within the relative to no effect. Every one of us feels within himself that morality and unselfishness and doing good to others are good, and without these neither the individual nor the nation can develop. Even men standing outside the pale of any religion, are advancing them on utilitarian grounds, that we must do that which brings the greatest amount of good to the greatest number. But if we question why we should do that, why should I look upon my brother as myself and not try to secure the greatest amount of good for myself alone, even at the sacrifice of all else, no plausible answer is given. The answer, which the *Vedānta* gives to this question, is that you and I are not separate from this universe. It is by mistake we

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think ourselves to be distinct and unconnected entities, independent of one another. All history, all science show that it is just the opposite, that this universe is one connected whole, look at it from the external or the internal. There is no break in the external ocean of matter, in which our bodies but represent so many different points. Behind the external there is that one vast ocean of mind, in which our minds but represent so many different whirlpools, and behind that is the Soul, the Self, the Absolute and Perfect. Every thing in human life points towards this oneness. Our love, our sympathy, kindness, and doing good to others—all are but expressions conscious or unconscious of this oneness of man with the universe. Consciously or unconsciously every man feels it; consciously or unconsciously he tries to express it, that he is one with the

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Universal Being and as such every soul and every body is His body, that by injuring others he injures himself and by loving others he loves himself.

This gives rise to a subtle but unfounded question. Shall we lose our individuality when we attain the superconscious stage, the highest point of evolution ? The *Vedānta* questions in its turn : are we individuals as yet, in the proper sense of the term ? Does individuality mean the changing element in man or does it apply to the unchangeable essence in him ? Do you apply the term individuality to the body and mind of man which is changing every minute ? If so, there is no occasion for former question in as much as we are losing or changing our individuality every minute of our existence. Think what great changes have we, each one of us, undergone since we

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were born, think what a change for the wicked when he becomes a good member of society, or the primitive man when he becomes civilized, or think what great change of a barbarous individuality when through the process of evolution the ape-form changes into the man-form ? Do we lament the change of individuality in these cases ? The *Vedānta* says by developing your individuality, you rise to a point where you become a perfect individual. You change your apparent present individuality for a better and real one. The process of evolution is from lawlessness through law beyond law, from the unconscious through the conscious beyond the conscious. Our conscious existence, where every action is accompanied with a feeling of egoity does not cover the whole of our existence. During sleep or in performing actions which are known

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as the automatic actions, there is no feeling of egoity present and yet we do exist, though we enter a stage which is below the conscious and inferior to it. In the highest stage of development also there is no feeling of egoity, but it is infinitely superior to the consious. Apparently in a superficial view the highest and the lowest stages of development seem to be one and the same, but there is as much difference between the two, as between darkness produced by the want of light and darkness produced by the excess of light, and known in science as the polarisation of light. There is an illiterate and ignorant man—he enters, and comes out a sage, a prophet, a great seer of thought He discovers in himself the eternal fountain-head of all knowledge and power; he finds the kingdom of heaven within. "For him," says the Vedas, "all doubts

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(and hankerings) vanish for ever and all selfish knots of the heart are cut asunder, the endless chain of cause and effect fades and dies for him who attains the Highest."

This attaining the superconscious existence has been described in many religions as seeing and realising and feeling God. The rapid march of reason has proved beyond doubt that all our ideas of God are perfectly anthropomorphic, that we are creating our own God and worshipping and paying reverence to our own mental representation. What is the necessity then of worshipping God ? Why shall I worship my own mental creation ? The history of evolution shows how the idea of God grows and develops with the growth of the man. Low from fetichism and animism he comes to polytheism and thence to monotheism. Suggested by his own dreams or the love of his dead ancestors, or the

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stupendous forces in nature, the idea of a future existence dawns in his infant mind, and he tries to peep behind the screen of the senses. How in his search after the super-sensuous, he comes up gradually through the stages of ancestor-worship and nature-worship, to the recognition of many spirits or gods behind all the different mighty forces of nature, and lastly how he comes to the conception of one supreme ruler at the head of these differtent gods and pays his homage to Him! Reason will say that although, this worship of the supper-sensuous was a great motive power in bringing out his powers and developing his mind, yet all this time he has been worshipping his own mental creations, and now that his eyes have been opened he ought to discard all these mistaken ideas of God. The *Vedānta* does not deny

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that all these different ideas of God are anthropomorphic, but it asks in its turn : are not all our ideas of the external the same ? Can we ever know the world but as our mind represents it to us, and has not science proved already that the senses are deceptive, and can never know things as they are ? Therefore if it is reasonable to reject all our ideas of God because they are anthropomorphic, it is reasonable also to throw away every other idea from the mind, but how many of us are willing to do so, and have power of doing so ? Then again, though all that we know of anything are what our minds represent them to be, yet they help us in developing ourselves, and bringing us higher and higher. Then lastly, what the *Vedānta* has to say in this point is that, man is not wrong or mistaken in his worshipping all these different ideas of God, only he has been travelling

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from lower to higher truths. His progress in this world is not from error to truth, but from lower and lower truths to higher and higher ones. Everything in this world, even truth itself, is relative. What is truth for one state of things or one plane of existence is not truth for another state or another plane, and the different ideas of God are nothing less than the differnt views of the Absolute, the Infinite from different planes of the relative. Supposing, for instance, we make a journey to the sun, our view of the sun changes every minute we proceed. With every step in advance we see newer and newer vision of the same sun. The sun which appeared to be a bright little disc grows larger and larger, till at last, when we reach the sun itself, we see the sun in its entirety. We know the sun as it is. The sun has not changed all the time, but our views of

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it have changed, till at last, we get the full view of the luminary. This is the progress of man towards the Infinite. His view of the Infinite has never become perfectly nil, but through the limitations of his senses, his intellect and all, he sees only a little bit of the Infinite but with his own limited faculties. As he grows, these limitations become less and less and he sees Infinite better and better, at last, all his limitations fade away as mists before the rising sun, and he grasps the Infinite in Its entirety ; he discovers in himself the Infinite ocean of Knowledge and Bliss. This has been beautifully expressed in the Vedas. 'Two birds of bright golden plumage, inseparable companions of each other, are sitting on the same tree, the one on the higher and the other on the lower branches of it. The upper bird not caring to taste the sweet and bitter fruits

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of the tree, sits majestic in his own glory and sees the lower one tasting the fruits. As the lower bird gets the taste of the bitter fruit of the tree, he grows disgusted and looks up to the splendid vision above him of the upper bird and draws himself nearer to him. He forgets again the glorious vision in his love for the fruits of the tree, and goes on tasting them as before, till he tastes another bitter fruit. He grows disgusted again and advances a little more towards the bright vision before him. So on he advances, till at last, when he reaches the upper bird, the whole vision changes, and he finds himself to be the upper bird who was sitting in all spledour and majesty all the time.'

The goal being thus the same in all religions, the *Vedānta* has no quarrel with any. It looks upon all the different religions as so many different ways for attain-

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ing that One, indivisible ocean of Knowledge and Bliss. 'As the different rivers, having their source in different mountains, roll down through crooked or straight paths and at last come into the ocean—so all these various creeds aed religions, taking their start from different standpoints and running through crooked or straight courses, at last come unto Thee, Oh, Lord.' The *Vedānta* condemns nobody, for it looks upon man not as he is at the present moment, but what he really is. It teaches that sooner or later every man will discover his real nature and will know himself as the source of all knowledge, power and bliss. Will or nil, every man is advancing towards that through every act that he is doing here. The worker by doing good to others, the philosopher by developing his reason, the lover of God by developing and directing his emotion,

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all will attain the superconscious plane, the highest stage of development. What if a man be an atheist or agnostic? The question is, is he sincere and is he ready to sacrifice himself for the good of others and for the truth that he has known? The *Vedānta* says there is no fear for him. He will come to higher and higher truths, and ultimately attain the highest. Allow infinite variation in religious thoughts. Follow your own, but do not try to bring everybody to the same opinion. It can never be, for is not unity in diversity the law of nature? And is not the goal the same, though the roads are different? Do not make yourself the standard for the universe, but know that Unity forms the background of this universe, and whatever way man might travel, at last he will arrive at that.

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